

## Autonomy of Learning and the Challenge of Existentialism: The Nigerian Experience

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*This position paper is a philosophical discourse on the place of autonomy of learning in education. The topic is informed by a reflection on the various problems that beset education, ranging from examination malpractice, poor performance in public examinations and false admission into higher institutions of learning, among other things. The writer tries to consider the place of autonomy in learners' activities. It is not uncommon to narrow down the consideration of autonomy to issues related to administration and funding of education, but this paper tries to critically see beyond these to postulate autonomy as a crucial foundation of learning itself. It adopts the existentialist philosophy as a search lamp to reach a conclusion that autonomy is natural to every learner and it carries in him the properties for learning as manifest in attributes of freedom, potency for choice-making and responsibility. Recommendations are made to teachers and other stakeholders in education to foster those things that could drive home a sense of autonomy in the learners and enhance personal commitment to learning.*

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**Keywords:** autonomy, examination malpractices, learning, existentialist, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

This topic is informed by the writer's reflection on the multiple problems that confront educational system in the world at large and in the Nigerian setting in particular. The author writes from Nigerian experience. These problems range from examination malpractice, false admission into universities and other institutions of learning, poor performance of the graduates of the schools thereby inviting the incessant debate on the quality of education particularly in Nigeria. These are among other problems and it is quite observable that one problem in the system gives birth to others. Problems about Nigerian education, for instance, manifests in various facets such as the intellectual, moral economic and political amongst others. They in turn determine the image of the nation before other nations. There is no nation that stipulates corruption, injustice, avarice, laziness and other social ills as a way of life. These are simply learnt and transmitted within the society as counter values. They are indices of poor education.

Learning has been as old as the human being himself and it is an attribute of living among human beings and animals. It remains the prerogative of the human beings to acknowledge that he knows what he knows and the degree of knowing, but this is not possible among animals. In the case of animals, one would observe that they learn but do not show capacity for analysis of learning. Whatever is said about their learning derives from human analysis. This position paper intends to probe reflectively on autonomy as a pre-condition to effective learning. It is not introducing the concept as new in education, rather it intends to examine it with existentialist lenses to see

what value and relevance it carries for effective education particularly in the Nigerian context.

This work is informed by Nigeria's interest in autonomy as an essential outcome of education. Nigeria education as stated in its National Policy is expected among other things to foster the development of the individual into sound and effective citizen and to integrate same into the community (NPE Lagos p. 2). The emphasis on individual as the focus of development bears the mark of autonomy since it is through autonomy that individuals could respond to the values expected of the educational system. Several disappointments are experienced in the life style of Nigerian leaders who are looked upon as models of the educated. Cases of money laundering and economic scandals among top functionaries are no news again. Corruption brings down the moral standard of the citizenry hence it becomes a fashion with every new leader to aspire to 'fight corruption'. Several disciplinary outfits and programmes had been set up in the past to fight corruption, but all to no avail. Corruption would stop when individuals learn to disengage from it, or do not engage in it at all. This awkward situation leaves one to ask whether there is any useful learning going on in the educational institutions or there is none. Besides, the moral backwardness, the academic decline is noticeable in the poor knowledge and incompetence of the school leavers. This one would say, accounts for the consistent mass failure in the schools. In the face of these and even in cases where the situation shows some improvement, the enjoyment or abuse of autonomy can be argued to form of the basis of the learning experience.

Reduction in standard has been the issue on Nigerian education. Some attribute this problem to poor quality of teachers as may be inferred from this remark:

Stakeholders have for long been complaining about the falling standards of education at all levels. Standard cannot be improved by lowering the quality of teachers. Poorly equipped teachers cannot turn out excellent graduates (*Daily Sun*, Tues, Feb. 5, 2008; 16).

While this point may sound appealing, the complimentary side to it is the learners who may equally have a share of the blame since a successful learning is the accomplishment of the learners as well as the teachers.

The problem of this paper is the impact of autonomy on learning and its relevance to a nation's education. This would be viewed from the existentialist perspective. Existentialism is a philosophy that places prominence of thought on man, experience and reality and blends these into personalized ideology. It considers reality as lived experience. For the existentialist, the human being and physical realities exist to the extent to which a man accords them meaning and purpose. This philosophy appears all embracing in the sense that it is neither scientific nor speculative in orientation. It was a development in the neoclassic works of a Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard (1873 – 1853) and one German philosopher, Nietzsche (1844 – 1900). This came as a departure from the earlier speculative ways of philosophizing and the dogmatic approach to beliefs as prevalent at the time.

The personalistic philosophy challenges thoughts on education, considering the process of learning the content, particularly in terms of value and the end-product of the cognitive activity. This is with a view to perusing the individual capacity to uplift the standard of education. Education in its present form exhibits some lapses in several ways. Any form of inadequacy experienced in the practice of education would be considered a lapse in this sense. Lapses in education could manifest in poor academic performance, inadequacy of teaching, poor teaching environment and methods, poor funding, low motivation to learning and lack of infrastructures, amongst others. Notwithstanding these problems education would show appreciable standard when the graduates of the school offer the right responses to societal needs and values. This would depend on good teaching and learning. Effective learning comes about when the individual committedly applies himself or herself to knowledge acquisition and application. The issue autonomy of learning comes of interest in this paper, in view of this assertion.

### What is Autonomy of Learning?

In a bid to consider this question, a possible impression is to place everybody in Plato's cave in which each person is a prisoner, limited in perception to shadows of reflections from around him. Every experience a person has at that time of learning is a shadow of reflection from which to discover reality when the chains of his or her imprisonment breaks and he or she is able to turn around the light and see. This analogy is descriptive of self-effort at learning which is the index of autonomy of learning. By way of definition, autonomy of learning may be described as the acquisition of experience through self-effort in perceiving world realities as they impress on a person. This definition asserts individual commitment as paramount to learning.

Autonomy of learning would consist in self-effort at perception because perception is the crux of learning. John Issitt (2007) in his discourse on 'Evidence and Metacognition in the New Regime of Truth' asserted autonomy of learning as ubiquitous in education. According to him, teachers from elementary to postgraduate levels are expected to promote learning that is characterized as autonomous. This is guided through policy formulation and issuance of directives, (p. 384). In his reference to an on-line document of the department for Education and Skills ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/foundation](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/foundation), stage) he traced autonomy of learning down to the beginning of a child's cognitive development and arrived of some points which shall be summarised thus:

- a. Children learn best when they are recognized as autonomous decision makers, even when they make mistakes, this recognition boosts their propensity to learn further.
- b. Children should be guided to take ownership of their own learning and behaviour to develop social, emotional and behavioural skills.
- c. Skills developed in schools would make the children develop as 'Life-long learners'.
- d. From about the age of 14, the figure of autonomous learner assumes the 'independent learner' and this is present throughout the levels of learning.(p. 384).

This summary to a certain extent, specify features of autonomy. These include, being free, independent and life-long. Actually the term 'autonomy' from philosophical world view is traceable to the scientific metaphysical origins of the century when science emancipated from philosophy through the recognition of its own proper methods of research. In this scientific dispensation, as Bamisaye (2004) attests, the universe became an autonomous self-maintaining and closed system of purely natural forces, mechanistic and deterministic (p. 1). If the universe is so perceived it follows then that all things in the universe share these characteristics. Man who is at

the centre of the universe demonstrates autonomy in the sense that it is he who perceives it and accords it meaning. Autonomy therefore is primordial to the nature of man as it is to the rest of the universe.

Autonomy, freedom and independence are three related concepts that go together yet they are not synonyms. Autonomy as a concept is explainable in terms of freedom and independence. It is a power concept that connotes power-to-be, power-to-do, power-to-become and power-to-claim among others. If autonomy is conceived and explained as power, other allied concepts such as authority, control, ownership, independence and responsibility, among others may embody the conception of autonomy since these also are power concepts. In respect of autonomy of learning, one may ask: Are we really empowered to learn? Do we have authority over what we learn? Do we learn independently? These and several other questions could be asked. Let us examine them together R. T. Allen, in his discourse on "Education of Autonomous man", described man as a "self-defining subject in a meaningless universe". (Bamisay, 2004). Thus by implication, man owns the authority and responsibility to redefine himself in every circumstance, since every circumstance poses a learning situation. He is accorded with the ability or power to do it, hence he puts this power into action at every instance of learning. Autonomy as power therefore is primarily conceived as the ability to re-make oneself and be responsible to oneself on whatever one becomes.

Again Allen continued: "Men became responsible for themselves but no longer responsible to anything above and beyond themselves". (Allen, 1992) If man is responsible to himself and to nothing else it means that man's conception of the universe depends on his interpretation of it and it is to this interpretation that man responds as he lives. Other things in the universe outside him are mere assets for him to re-make himself. Autonomy of learning therefore encompasses power or ability to interpret one's perceptions and make use of such to re-make oneself. The issue of re-making the self as the end of every learning activity becomes enticing and raises a question: Does every learning actually lead to re-making oneself? What of learning to recognize a thing as it is and no more? To these one would answer that in as much as every learning makes a connection of what is learnt with oneself, the self is at the centre of learning and every experience attained contributes to re-making oneself. Learning to recognize a thing as it could bring about differentiation in identity between oneself and that thing. This, in turn, could suggest appropriate relationship with what is recognized. Some traditional philosophers have one view or the other about autonomy. Some see it as a variant of freedom while some see it as "scientific differentiation of

freedom" (Bamisay, 2004 p. 2). Allen, again, sees it as "Radical freedom" in the sense that man possesses the capacity to decide, choose and think out his own way of life. (p. 2). Aristotle's attempt to resolve the problem of change and permanence whereby he recognised that in any possible natural event, there must be something that remains the same and yet somehow subject to variation, thus when an acorn grows into an oak, there must be some permanent feature of the acorn in the oak. Aristotle's position seems to be what may be understood as autonomy of being which explains the retention of the essence of anything even in the face of changes. The essence of the acorn remains even though it has taken a new form in the oak. Autonomy of being as we may understand it, perdures in everything that exists in as much as an object in nature assumes new features while retaining the essence of its old nature.

The Cartesian theory of education of mind and body offers another perception of autonomy. Descartes postulates the existence of mind and body as independent entities which by nature come together in man to give him a functional identity. Each entity retains its being. The mind is the receptacle for thinking while the body is the framework that carries the functioning parts of a person. In his work, *The Principles of Philosophy*; Descartes declares:

*Although any one attribute is enough to give us knowledge of a substance, there is always one chief property of a substance that constitutes its nature and essence, and upon which all others depend.* (Popkin and Stoll, 1993, p. 106)

This point one would say, substantiates the notion of autonomy of being since changes or variations come upon the essence of the substance that remains unchanged. It is autonomous and makes the substance unique.

For Rousseau, the notion of autonomy is demonstrated in his recognition of and emphasis on the place of the individual as he or she battles with the forces of the society in a bid to assert himself or herself. In his work, *Emile*, he gave a picture of the sanity of man as an individual who needs to wade through the wave of the society to realize himself. (p. 107). This position on autonomy of the individual aligns with the Aristotelian position on autonomy of being, in this case, the human essence in the face of corruptive changes by the society. Other traditional thinkers, could be examined to see what they contribute to thought on autonomy whether from ethical, epistemological or metaphysical perspective. This paper does not intend to dwell on a length review of thoughts on autonomy, rather it seeks to affirm autonomy as power or endowment the individual possesses over himself. It is in this way autonomy of learning has meaning.

### The Challenge of Existentialism

Existentialism as a philosophy developed like any other philosophy from perception and attitude to life with the focus of the perceiver to accord life a meaning. It is a revolutionary move to counter earlier philosophies which in the main were speculative and inclined to metaphysics. This philosophy came as outright rejection of metaphysics and its doctrinal views of life and nature. According to it, knowledge is the making of the knower. Reality is what one experiences and it is the individual that is capable of naming it, thus making it utterly subjective - The personalistic nature of this philosophy lends much for thinking on the issue of autonomy of learning. Existentialism had its roots in various nineteenth century ideas and by the twentieth century it became prominent in continental Europe especially in France and Germany. The forerunners of this school of thought in Europe were Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche who denounced ecclesiastical Christianity and idealism of Hegel, while Kierkegaard attempted to revitalize Christianity from within himself but Nietzsche rejected Christianity totally. Other leading existentialists include Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Karl-Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber among others. This paper will not go into details of individual thinkers theories since this may not be relevant to the issue at stake. For this reason we shall only enumerate the tenets of the philosophy.

The focus of existentialism as a philosophy is man in concrete existence, that is to say, man in active engagement in thinking, feeling, and responding to the call of nature through the exercise of will-power. This invites passionate reasoning that involves the whole self. The product of such reasoning consists in such ideals as 'Freedom', 'Responsibility,' 'Choice', and 'Relationship' amongst others. Each of these terms presume others and finds total expression in individual person. Wallace (2006) remarked that it is difficult to characterise existentialism as a whole. However he gave what he called some dominant themes. These are summed up as follows:

- a. An absorbing interest in human existence of the individual.
- b. A concern with the individual as a conscious self and a responsible agent with the themes of consciousness and freedom.
- c. A focusing on man in his concreteness and individuality.
- d. A fascination with the non-rational element in existence.
- e. A rejection of God in whose absence death becomes an absolute. (p. 32)

A factorial idea to make from these is that man exists in a condition of individuality and freedom. This could manifest in any facet of human behaviour such as perceiving, ideating, establishing relationships,

choice-making among others. All these are elements of human learning to which existentialism gives a boost. The existentialists postulates that whatever a person becomes is his own responsibility. Learning for is an exercise in becoming and thus by implication an individual's responsibility.

Although existentialist philosophers have not written much on education, the core of their philosophy carries implications for the learning process. The personalistic nature of the philosophy makes it inclined to uphold autonomy of learning since autonomy is a trait of personalism. The world as we have it is a contingency, something that happens to be there. Learning involves man's contact with the existents to make meaning of them and design the purpose they could serve. For instance, the realities discovered by science are ascertainable only to the extent to which they enable man make himself. Simply put, man learns to make himself as he makes cognitive contact with people and things in the world. To do this, he makes affective interpretations of them as well. Man conceives no world order except what he makes to himself. His existence is paramount to his essence and in fact takes precedence over it. J. P. Sartre (1947) puts this point in his own way. He said:

*What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself. If a man as existentialist sees him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing' only afterwards will be something and he himself would have made what he will be ... Man is nothing other than what he makes himself. (p. 18)*

The issue of existence preceding essence may be disputable in the sense that essence manifests in being and being comes before existence. To place existence before being would be acting contrary to nature. For example the foetus is a human being on its way to existence. Being therefore takes precedence over existence. However, one would analyse further that there are two dimensions to man making himself. The first is what may be simply called the interior dimension while the second is the exterior. Man makes himself interiorly by first learning to perceive himself from within that he is a conscious being whose existence he could ascertain through thinking on ways to project himself in the open world. Thinking in this sense assumes interior monologue within the self in which several things are brought into awareness and considered in relation to the self. The human brain is the cradle for all our thoughts. The interior monologue begins from there and continues unabated. Harry Hazel (1998) retorted:

*The way we talk to ourselves and the language we use has much to do with our happiness, our relationship with others*

*and our success ... we talk to ourselves more than anybody else. Because our thoughts race along at about 400 words per minute, we can both carry on a 125 word per minute conversation and also think about what we are going to say to others. And when we are alone it is virtually impossible to shut off our internal conversations. (p. 2)*

Several deductions can be made from this. First our perceptions are derived and controlled by the quality of interior conversations that we make and they in turn make recourse to them. Every perception leaves an imprint in the mind. The imprint inevitably becomes the material for interior monologue. Secondly, the higher frequency accorded interior talk as differentiated from the exterior makes it possible for one to learn to utilize exterior thoughts and ideas to make himself in the course of interior conversation. Again, the persistence of internal conversation as glaringly manifest at the time of loneliness points to the possibility of man constantly making himself in every condition he is. Hazel pointed out further: "Even when we are asleep, we talk to ourselves in dreams. Some of us talk out loud to the consternation and insomnia of those trying to sleep in the same room". (p. 4). Every instance of thinking therefore whether at sleep or wakefulness enables man to make himself.

The second and more obvious dimension to man making himself is the exterior one. At this, man, perceives other realities outside himself, learns to interpret them to enable him make decisions on them. Through decision-making he throws his ego upon his percepts. He could be rightly described as making himself in this instance in the sense that his decisions are expressive of the relationship he forms with the objects of his perception. Our exterior conversation derives from and in turn builds upon the interior one. Again, Hazel remarked on the unification of exterior and interior conversations. He said:

Whether we like it or not our self-talk has often been controlled by what others say to us ... ironically the self image we carry around today has very little to do with how we actually look, or how intelligent we are. It consists of a combination of all the messages we have received over the years and which we have stored in our central nervous system. (p. 6)

Through the function of conservation and retrieval of experiences by the brain, the human mind is rendered capable of carrying out both exterior and interior conversations simultaneously using the materials of one conversation to feed the other. What is paramount to the conversations is man's engagement in the cognitive exercise either within himself alone

or along with others. It is through this he learns to make himself.

### **Relevance of Existentialism to Autonomy of Learning**

Existentialism as a philosophy of the self-maker makes a crucial contribution to the issue of autonomy of learning. This is in view of the fact that man learns by himself to make himself. Even when auxiliary agents interfere in his learning process, he makes use of the experiences acquired from them to speak to himself and design the necessary relationships. This point builds on one of the issues of existentialist theory, which is choice-making. By their contention, the existentialists assert that choice making is an essential hallmark of living. If man exists to make himself then his being alive, his style of life and the several attributes to his life would purely be his own choice. A choice is expressive of one's exercise of freedom. Freedom, in itself is simply a potential for choice-making, nothing else. The autonomous learner would learn through the exercise of freedom to make a choice whether to learn or not, what to learn, as well as when and how to learn. This philosophy informs autonomy of learning is the conception of man as independent being. In all encounters man entertains the consciousness of independence and it is this that guides him to make a choice of what to learn and what not to learn as well as the modalities of going about learning. All these, again are indices of his autonomy of learning.

Learning implies teaching whether it is through self tutelage as it manifests when one engages in interior communication, or through tutelage from others as in exterior communications. By the existentialist principle, teaching to enhance autonomy of learning should focus on the person of the learner rather than the subject matter since it is the learner that makes a choice of what to learn. Whatever is learnt therefore is presumed to focus on the development of the individuality of the learner.

There is a crucial question to ask at this point: Is autonomy of learning optional? This question comes about from a reflection on the dichotomy on autonomous and non-autonomous learner as introduced by Issit. (p. 386). He asserted a dualistic position in which the knower is at one pole of learning with the object of knowledge at the other pole. But he maintained that the identity of the autonomous learner is not necessarily innate or attainable through self discovery, rather it is one that is attainable through self effort on the social expectations that characterise it. One would uphold a contrary view to this in the sense that autonomy of learning is not an attainment but an endowment that is inherent in the experience of learning itself. The essence of discussing this issue is to activate the

awareness of the individual on autonomy as a foundation for every intellectual exercise particularly at the interface of learning. The question raised therefore would assume a negative answer that autonomy of learning is not optional but a deterministic feature of man's cognitive wakefulness. Learning through the self effort, otherwise known as heuristic learning may symptomise autonomy, but this is not the only instance of it.

Existentialist theory on man's freedom and choice-making serves a good base for this natural feature. It is an observable principle that man learns by himself whether he enjoys the assistance of a teacher or not. Simply put, no one makes the other learn. Teaching only facilitates learning but the experience of learning solely belongs to the learner. This individualistic perspective makes learning by nature autonomous. Autonomy of learning is not an innovation in the learning process but an essential feature of it. Choice-making is essential to this autonomy in the sense that a learner chooses whether to learn or not, what to learn, the way to learn it and in turn determines the time and circumstance for him to learn a particular thing.

#### CONCLUSION

In as much as learning goes synonymously with living, going by the existentialists' belief, man's freedom, or otherwise autonomy subsists in the experience of learning. As he lives man is guided and controlled by his perceptions which ultimately become the source of learning. Perception is the individual experience of the perceiver, by implication it is autonomous since no one perceives for the other. Though two or more people can share the same perception.

For education to foster the development of the individual into sound and effective citizen, going by Nigerian's educational policy, it requires that the individual should responsibly be committed to acquisition of knowledge and experiences and determine the best way to put the experiences into use. A nation is said to develop when individuals possess relevant knowledge and learn to apply it for meaningful living. A situation where learners in the school system show little or no concern for knowledge acquisition but direct their interests to attainment of high scores which do not say the true position of intellectual competence of learners lives such learners with unfinished products from the education system. The certificates awarded in such a situation lose credibility. Stakeholders in school education are therefore challenged to do all things possible to promote personal commitment to learning. For example subject teachers should be employed based on expertise not on mere compassion to provide a job for the job-seeker. The attempt of the government to reinstate the professionalism of

teaching would be on the right track. This is hoped would bring expertise touch to classroom teaching which could in turn facilitate autonomous self application to learning. Evaluation of learning would focus on individual performance rather than class or school performance. Also the methodology of learning every subject should be taught along with the contents. This could guide learners on appropriate ways to learn the subjects by themselves.

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